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ABSTRACT

This brief report describes the Rosetta Stone Language Library, a set of multimedia second language instructional materials. These materials emphasize comprehension of spoken language as the first step to acquiring fluency, sometimes referred to as the "comprehension approach" or "natural approach." The materials are designed to develop language learners' listening skills, using pictures to create contexts where meaning is clear, elicit responses, and provide immediate feedback. Seven core themes of the comprehension approach are identified, with reference to a number of language learning theorists and to testimonials about the materials themselves. (MSE)

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The Learning Theory behind

The Rosetta Stone Language Library™

from Fairfield Language Technologies

By Allen Stoltzfus

The Rosetta Stone is based on this idea: the best model for learning a new language is the natural way in which we learned our native language. This idea has been espoused by a school of thought that emphasizes comprehension of spoken language as the first step to acquiring fluency. This is called "the comprehension approach" or sometimes "the natural approach."

The native language is learned by hearing simplified speech in a context which provides the cues that make this speech comprehensible. This context also provides immediate reinforcement to the child. The Rosetta Stone works in the same way. It uses thousands of carefully selected pictures to create contexts where the meaning is clear. The program elicits the student's response and gives instantaneous feedback, confirming the comprehension that has taken place.

Research and experience with "the natural, comprehension approach" has generated much interest and enthusiasm. There have been two obstacles standing in the way of implementation:

1) It is difficult for a teacher to present a context so rich that extensive classroom speech in the target language can be understood.

2) It is difficult for a teacher to verify comprehension, especially comprehension by each member in a class.

The Rosetta Stone addresses these problems:

1) It uses thousands of pictures in carefully chosen contexts and sequences to present a rich, meaningful context. These pictures convey the meaning that is contained in the spoken language.

2) The computer allows tireless, individual comprehension checking. The student identifies the picture being spoken about or the speech describing a picture and learns instantly whether his understanding is correct.

Using state-of-the-art technology, The Rosetta Stone Language Library combines interactivity, immersion and multimedia to create a learning system centered on listening comprehension. It replicates the give and take that occurred in the learning of the native language and turns the laborious and difficult task of learning a new language into a successful, satisfying experience.

Seven Core Themes of the "Comprehension Approach" Theory

(References below refer to books listed at the end of this paper.)

1) The first step in learning our native language was to understand spoken language.

"Many months before an infant begins to talk...the individual has constructed an intricate map to decode into information the noises coming from people's mouths." (Asher, p. 50, The Comprehension Approach)

2) The "acquisition" of language is more like learning to swim or ride a bike than it is like understanding a classroom lecture. It is learning by doing.

"The acquisition of skills, whether it involves typing, playing a musical instrument, or learning a foreign language..." (Belasco, p. 16, p. 14, The Comprehension Approach)

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3) The target language is learned by hearing simplified speech in a context which provides the cues that make speech comprehensible. Visual cues can be especially helpful.

"This is why visual aids are so useful. Pictures and other visual aids supply for the adult what the "here and now" does for the child. They supply the extra-linguistic context that helps the acquirer to understand and thereby acquire." (Krashen and Terrell, p. 55, The Natural Approach)

4) Learners need to verify and test their understanding of the spoken language after each short speech segment.

"The program must provide for a student response that will verify comprehension of each utterance or short passage immediately after delivery." (Postovsky, p. 176, The Comprehension Approach)

5) Learning which effectively presents listening comprehension is far faster than conventional learning.

"Students, after only 32 hours...outperformed controls who had 150 hours of college German." (Krashen and Terrell, p. 37, The Natural Approach)

"After just forty-five hours of instruction the average performance of the students...was equivalent to that of...students who had 200 hours of instruction." (Winitz, p. 122, The Comprehension Approach)

6) Learning through listening comprehension offers retention which is dramatically superior.

"It was a surprising finding that the soldiers retained all of the material after ten days..." (Winitz, p.129, The Comprehension Approach)

"In an attempt to explain the extraordinary stability of memory over time, Postovsky interviewed the students." (Asher, p. 194, The Comprehension Approach)

7) Speaking fluency "emerges" by itself naturally after sufficient listening comprehension has been developed.

"Spoken fluency in second languages is not taught directly. Rather, the ability to speak fluently and easily in a second language emerges by itself, after a sufficient amount of competence has been acquired through input." (Krashen and Terrel, p. 20, The Natural Approach)

"Linguistic competence is facilitated when training in oral production is not attempted until considerable fluency in aural comprehension has been developed." (Postovsky, p. 181, The Comprehension Approach)

Proponents of the "Comprehension Approach"

The Comprehension Approach to Foreign Language Instruction (Newbury House Publishers, 1981)

Harris Winitz (Editor), Professor of Speech Science and Psychology, University of Missouri, Kansas City
Simon Belasco, Professor of French Linguistics, University of South Carolina
James J. Asher, Professor of Psychology, University of California at San Jose
Valarian A. Postovsky, Former Director, Slavic Languages, Defense Language Institute, Monterey, California

The Natural Approach: Language Acquisition in the Classroom (Alemany Press, Regents/ Prentice Hall)

Stephen D. Krashen, Professor of Education, University of Southern California
Tracy D. Terrell, Professor of Linguistics, University of California at Irvine